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by Helen Maxson

In the dedication of his chapbook *Learning to Love the Music*, poet John Graves Morris refers to Bruce Edward Taylor as "the better maker," evoking both Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which is dedicated to Ezra Pound as *"il miglior fabbro,"* and Dante's *Purgatorio*, which uses the same phrase to honor Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel (26.117). Eliot's dedication to Pound is commonly translated from the Italian as "the better craftsman," given Pound's editorial activity in urging Eliot to cut large chunks of his long poem. The difference between Taylor as "maker" and Pound as "craftsman" is instructive to readers of *Learning to Love the Music*, because its stress on creativity brings forth one of the main differences between the world and life Morris's book depicts, on the one hand, and a waste land on the other.

Of course, reading a collection of poems as if it were a unified text, as if each poem contributed a part to a whole, is not always a valid practice. But in *Learning to Love the Music*, similar images from different poems—for example, albino June bugs ("Night Vision"), months-early white seeds drifting across a cold sky ("Middle of February"), and soaring white hawks ("Song")—suggest a kinship that unifies the book. Other image systems, like reflections in water, circles, references to the seasons and children; recurrent themes like yearning, blossoming, and time: these elements of Morris's book reinforce our sense of the poems as different areas of one region, like the sections of Eliot's poem, or as chapters of a single story. While it is true that life in this book is consistently characterized by loneliness and the discouraging effects of time, its world differs from Eliot's sterile waste land in the certainty that it will produce not only rain, but spring, flowers, young people, passionate feelings, and poems—products of an immanent fertility that exists, ironically, alongside the book's emptiness.

In his dedication, Morris is defining himself in terms of—and against—his poetic forebears, an endeavor the entire chapbook undertakes. Like Eliot's waste land, the world of *Learning to Love the Music* is conjured by many voices, and Morris is clear that it is a collaborative creation. In fact, it is by exploring the impulse to connect with others that the book explores the theme of fertility. In a passage called "Notes" that precedes the book's dedication, Morris cites the roles of his creative writing students in writing "lines, or versions of lines" of one poem, mentions allusions to lines by Dylan Thomas and William Butler Yeats in another poem, and credits another writer with the opening lines of a third. Passages from other writers are cited on a page just preceding Morris's first poem and just under the titles of several of the book's poems. Direct quotation of song lyrics by popular artist Paul Simon expands the world of the book, as do evocations of poems by Yeats and Thomas other than those mentioned in Morris's "Notes," and our recognition of dilemmas famously explored by major authors including James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins. At certain moments, subtle music of Morris's lines evokes that of earlier poets, and, well-schooled by the rest of the book, we trust our impulse, tentative though it is, to find meaning in those echoes.

In this rich fabric of voices, the poet of *Learning to Love the Music* acknowledges and celebrates the roots of his work in poems and songs of other artists, some of which he had learned to love before he wrote his own. An ease and a fluidity in the book's allusions suggest that this learning was a natural, somewhat effortless, process. But the phrase "learning to love" suggests a concerted effort and reflects a theme of complex family dynamics that play against the speaker's comfort in the

literary tradition that has shaped him, the theme of feelings about his father, his sister, his nieces and nephews, and his own childlessness. The title of the poem "On Having Outlived Dylan Thomas: A Meditation During A Family Reunion" connects literary tradition with family, and the book as a whole considers each form of membership in light of the other.

Fairly in-depth portraits of children are frequent in the book and dramatize the process of learning to love one's music, whether familial or literary, as the poems' speaker lives that process out. At times, the adult speaker of a poem is identified with a child or with children, the implication being that he has learning yet to do in order to connect fruitfully beyond himself. In the book's opening poem, "What Control There Is," the "inner child" of the adult speaker impedes his romantic connection with a woman. In the book's title poem, the adult speaker is, again, "a grown child" who, as the imagery of thawing ice and rushing water at the poem's end suggests, grows past a distant relationship with his difficult but loving father to consciousness of the strong, though barely expressed, love that informs it. The "music" the child learns to love in that poem involves the father's "full voice" that "jackhammers" his opinions on various topics, as well as the jazz that the father enjoys and that the son has learned, over time, to enjoy as well. In fact, the poem's opening lines suggest an equation between the father's jackhammering and the "long, quiet solo" of his jazz, a bifocal perspective that brings out the incongruity between the child's view and the adult son's, as if it is not until adulthood that the speaker has been able to hear the music of qualities that have brought a solitary dimension to his father's life. It is the same incongruity that, as we have seen, fragments the speaker of the book's first poem. In "So Close To All That Hunger," an adult teacher is taught by the five-year-old daughter of his student. In either dynamic—whether the teacher is half-child/half-adult, or is taught as an adult by a child—he is learning what he must learn about connecting with relatives, lovers, and other artists. Furthermore, in all these episodes, the theme of fertility is at play.

Loneliness is also a recurrent theme of the book. The rich vision that unifies these poems explores qualities, like the vitality of children, that counter the sterility loneliness can imply, though without alleviating it. There is a repeated emphasis in these poems on a generating energy behind what is made in this world, a fertility that produces living things like children, poetry, flowers, and foliage. In the poem "Early March," the first blossoms of spring are killed by the return of frost, and the poem describes a parallel event in the writing of poetry. When "winter" returns unexpectedly in the writing process, "all" images of the natural world that might make a poem are

> . . . resorted & pulled back by memory
> inside the tidal corridor of the mind.
> The language of incipient spring
>
> & the grammar of winter's sudden return
> retouch the feet to known earth,
> our fragmented, renewing, momentary home...

The phrase "tidal corridor of the mind" suggests a locus of creative energy which, even at low tide or periods of low activity, is full of potential. In the chapbook's final poem, "Braille," the wind's scattering of berries and seeds in springtime produces new blossoms every year, blossoms that the poem likens to efforts of human breath to express in poetic language what we know and feel. Just as blossoms are replaced annually, poems are only momentary reflections of our changing experience. Neither blossoms nor poems bring pleasure once and for all, but both will always emerge:

> All we know is forgotten
> in breath, but pear trees
> under streetlights last night
> inspired & exfoliated
> white secrets, smoke
> signals from another world.

There is a sense here that the fertility of the natural world precedes as an eternal condition its temporary blossoms and its briefly telling poems as another world precedes and outlasts ephemeral smoke signals it sends. The poem refers to this condition, whether it lies in the natural world or in the mind, as an "evergreen intelligence," that, like "the tidal corridor of the mind," contains a creative potential preceding and transcending the fluctuations of tides and seasons. In the poem "Middle of February," images of trees reversed in a puddle's reflection "grow away from the sky, / yearning erasing itself, / smudging action back to thought. . . ." In this image, a locus of thought precedes what it produces, here specific actions; and some process of origination precedes tree limbs that—like a cat frightened by a car's motor and fleeing in a rear-view mirror in an "inverse of panic"—grow backward toward their origin rather than outward toward the sky.

In the chapbook's penultimate poem, "Nearing Forty and Having Driven Alone for Hours the First Cold Night in Autumn," sexual feelings bring to mind intimacy with a woman, and they always will, even when, as the speaker ages, that fertile connection becomes less likely: "The body, the body / never forgets to dream." Described as "an urge against the current," the speaker's sexual impulses work against the approach of death. We think of Dylan Thomas's emphatic advice to his father to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light"; Morris's speaker seems to know, perhaps more calmly, of some inner, eternal vitality that will enable his resistance of time. Perhaps that knowledge is one advantage the speaker has acquired in the poem "On Having Outlived Dylan Thomas: A Meditation During a Family Reunion," in which outliving one's forebears involves finding and trusting the vitality of one's own music amidst the voices of theirs:

> I have lived to look quietly
> and see, tussling with words
> until I have learned
> to speak with these voices
> and, surrounded by blue light,
> cast my shadow over the ground.

Like the ephemeral smoke signals of the poem "Braille," a poet's voice in this world is more shadow than substance, but as such it reflects a fertility in the order of things that one can learn to trust and use.

Still, learning to live fruitfully in this world can involve feelings that share the strength of the rage Thomas urges. As we have seen, the poem "Learning to Love the Music" ends with a vitality that may be akin to that of an evergreen intelligence or a tidal corridor, a love that has always been there but is only newly recognized. Perhaps, there is a kind of raging in that "snowmelt / raging down the mountain," inspired by the father's recent bout with cancer and the son's awareness of his father's mortality, that does not need encouragement to exist.

We see the same vitality in the poem "So Close To All That Hunger: Why I Don't Often Smile When a Woman At Work Tells Me I Should." At the poem's beginning, a university English professor plays on the beach in California with nieces and nephews, stepping back from the "incoming swells of water," the "chilly surf that kept rushing / over the sand toward my feet." When he comes home to Oklahoma, he feels "more alone than I can remember." He describes an indirect and uncomfortable sense of intimacy with a student whose father "I am old / enough to be," who has included in a class assignment a few details about her own sexuality and an abusive relationship with a boyfriend. There is a faint suggestion of flirtation with her in brief joking comments that pass between them.

In the next section of the poem, the teacher remembers, not a moment of intimacy with a former lover, but a period in which he mourned a former lover acutely; in those thoughts, the poem moves from the avoidance of stepping back from the cold waves in California toward a greater willingness to claim one's own experience:

> . . . Feeling
> bad, feeling something, right now
> seems like a good time I need again,
> if only I would allow myself.

A few lines later, the speaker enters the waters of his own experience more fully:

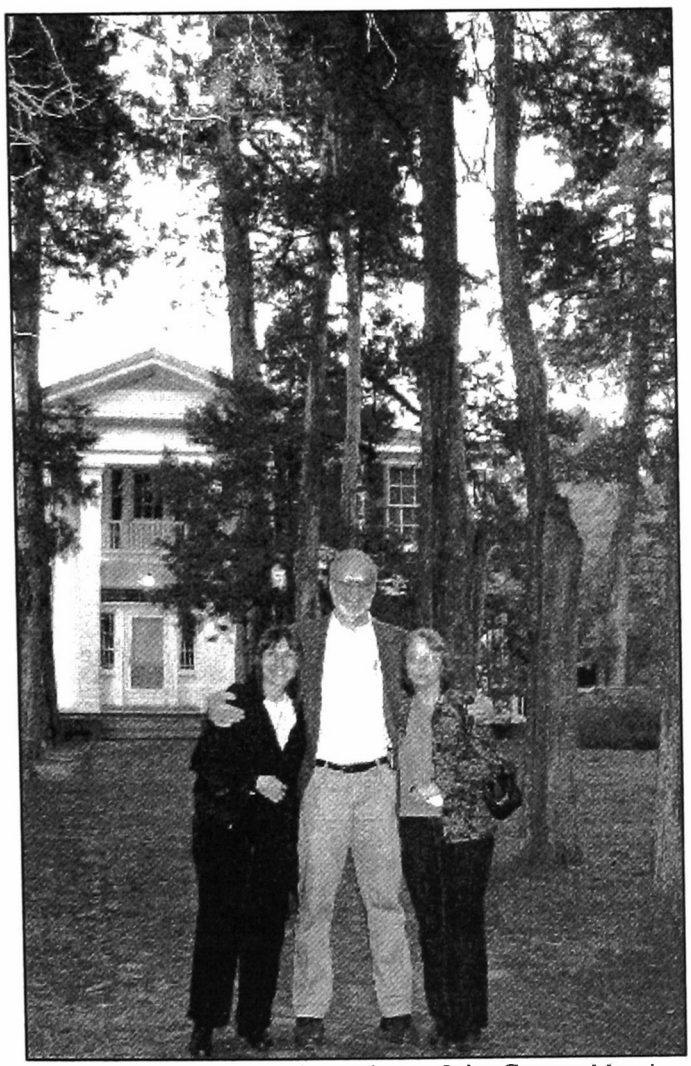
> Despite having my heels dug in,
> I let myself be tugged under
> the inward rolling water of sleep.
>
> Still, he continues to hold back:
> I float alone at great ease,
> but feint a path along coral reefs,
> declining to breathe the amnion
> of sunstruck plankton & schooling fish . . .
> . . .
> I am enthralled in my usual solitude. . .

Knowing it would bring nourishment, he nonetheless refuses to take in the water. When he finally succumbs to his own feelings, it is in response to the somewhat annoying five-year old daughter of a student who has come in for help with her work.

> . . . For the third
> time, she climbs into my lap
> as I struggle to concentrate
> on her mother's paper & fixes
> her brown eyes on my face,
> causing me to turn the narcotic
> of my attention fully to them
> & her teeth nibbling her mouth.
> So close to all that hunger,
> the tide relentlessly coming in
> & rolling over the top of me,
> I pull her closer with my arm
> and almost without thinking
> touch my lips to her fine hair,
> famished & tasting with salt
> the fear that I will never again
> be able to live without such eyes—
> undisguised, shining, insatiable—
> the need not even a parent can fulfill,
> and I am no one's father,
> looking up from the bottom of the sea.

Certainly Eliot's Prufrock, who doubts the mermaids will sing to him, has helped to shape this powerful moment in Morris's poem, as have the child's undisguised feelings and the sadness the teacher feels at knowing he is neither father nor lover to the girl. The intimacy here, with its touch of sexuality, is as momentary as the joking moment with his other student. Still, it was the child's hunger for the attention of the teacher that freed him to experience his own hunger for intimacy and, therefore, to write the poem. Morris's phrase "tidal corridor of the mind," like the roaring snowmelt and the drowning sea, becomes a storehouse not only of ideas and words, but also of feelings and experiences, some painful. "Evergreen intelligence" involves facing loss and lack. In effect, the fertility that characterizes the world of this book reinforces as necessary music the very loneliness and emptiness it is defined against.

Accordingly, the role of children in the learning dramatized by these poems is ambiguous. We remember that the middle-aged lovers and the child of the first poem end up feeling distant from each other, each wrapped in an "autumnal stillness." We remember that the adult child who feels strong love for his father barely expresses it. We have seen that the professor who finds his own hunger in that of a child has no way to satisfy it. Toward the end of the book, images of childhood drop away. The arrangement of the poems in the book seems



The author (right) with her subject, John Graves Morris (center), and a colleague, Valerie Reimers (left). Photo courtesy of Jill Jones

to trace an overall process of seeing past childish perspectives, like an annoyance with a father that obscures one's love for him, and then moving beyond those lessons. After the book's title poem and the one following it, which can be seen as extending the speaker's new understanding of his father, the poems focus more on creative concerns of writing poetry and the experience of being middle-aged, without defining that experience against childhood. In this evolution, one form of vitality is lost to the book—the eyes of Morris's children shine, their behavior is impulsive and transgressive. The poem, "Nearing Forty and Having Driven Alone for Hours The First Cold Night in Autumn" describes a similar loss: the impulses to bond with a woman and to parent children come with a backward glance:

> Patches of cloud scud
> in front of the full moon
> in the rear-view mirror,
> a sudden ocher areola:
> my penis stirs in my trousers,
> salmon-tipped, blind,
> an urge against the current.

There is a mourning in these retrospective stirrings. Nevertheless, in the next poem, the last one of the book, they become a study of the speaker's present task, the writing of poetry, and a celebration of the "evergreen intelligence" that the poet must learn to discern in the world around him, to represent in his work, and to locate in his own poetic gift. And, as we have seen, even the body's mournful dreaming participates in the larger fertility at play in the world of these poems. Side by side, these last two poems suggest that even though one kind of fulfillment may drop away, always to be missed, another kind, already a part of the poet's life, will always lie in store. The approach of winter in the penultimate poem is succeeded in the final poem by the vitality of breathing and of a warm sun that, in its touch, teaches the poet a mode of perception that can be faithful to a living, changing reality:

> the sun's yellow fingers
> poring over the braille
> of leaves a shade of green we, too,
> must now touch to believe.

These images of springtime express the peacefulness of an aging, perhaps somewhat cynical, creative adult.

They are images that an accomplished poet might, in a parental gesture, share with his students of creative writing, offering them an inspiring voice with which to speak for a while and enabling them to outlive it in their own.

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